

# Archæological Newsletter

The Committee for Field Archaeology



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## **Ancient Beer: or the wayward ethnographic wanderings of an archaeologist**

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In 2004, I visited the excavations of a friend of mine, Kevin Vaughn, in the Nasca drainage of southern Peru. I convinced Kevin to go up with me to a shack on the way home from the site so that I could pursue an ongoing side interest of mine – *chicha*, or corn beer. After exchanging a few pleasantries with a genial old man, I asked him, how much *chicha* was drunk at fiestas in the region. With the question, the man's face changed and he rose angrily to his feet and exclaimed, "*Chicha...chicha...who has been telling you that I drink chicha?*"

"No one," I sputtered, "we are doing a study on alcohol use and only want to ask a few questions..."

"Who have you been talking to?" he asked as he lurched forward, "Did you talk with my brother?" We mumbled our apologies and backedpedaled swiftly to the truck, another attempt at ethnographic research foiled for the day.

As my clumsy interviewing skills in this opening vignette illustrate, I am an archaeologist and not an ethnographer (**Figure 1**). Nonetheless from time to time, I have dabbled in both ethnography and experimental archaeology because of the importance of *chicha* to understanding the Andean



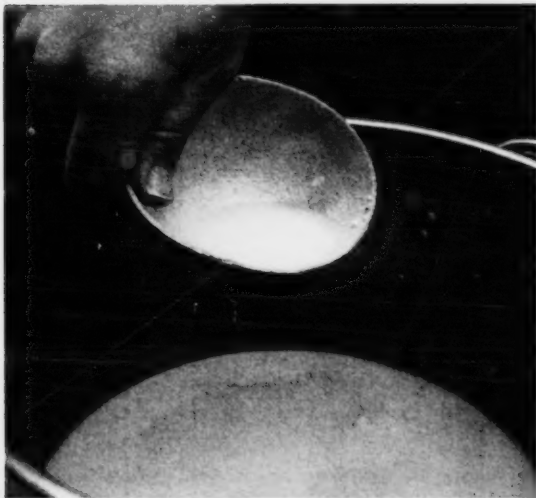
**Figure 1: The author enjoying *chicha* in the Cotahuasi Valley, Peru.**

past. The aborted interview in Nasca was the extension of a two week ethnographic project on the production and consumption of corn beer that I initiated the year before in the Cotahuasi Valley, the valley where I do my archaeological fieldwork in the highlands of southern Peru. Over the years, I have also exported corn beer samples from Peru

for nutritional and chemical analyses, brewed beer at home in order to conduct residue analyses of the fatty acids that might be left behind on ancient pot sherds, and even strapped heart monitors on friends to measure the calories burned in grinding and other processing steps (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2:** In a home-brewing experiment, my friends and I first ground corn into meal and then masticated the meal into gooeey lumps (top). At the end of the process, we separated the top layer of the *chicha* in order to transfer it into another vessel for fermentation (bottom).



## ***Chicha* – An Andean Beer**

A wide variety of plants, such as manioc and peanuts, were used to brew beer in the prehistoric Andes, but corn beer, known as *chicha* today, was perhaps the most common.

Like beers in Canada, there is tremendous variability in *chichas*. Some beers are purple (the colour depends on the colour of the maize grains) with the consistency of a Budweiser, while others are white and pour like a Guinness mixed with oatmeal. *Chicha's* alcoholic content by volume is generally low (less than 5%), but can vary between 1 and 12%. *Chicha* often tastes, to the uninitiated, like cornmeal left in water a few days too long.

In order to make *chicha*, you have to convert some of the starches in the maize to sugars by either chewing cornmeal or by allowing the maize to germinate and then grinding it into meal. The meal is then mixed with water and repeatedly heated and cooled over the course of one to three days. At the end of this time, the mixture has divided into three layers – the first layer is liquid, the second layer is jelly-like, and the third layer is grainy (the corn dregs). The top layer, and a bit of the second layer, is skimmed off, poured through a strainer, and put into another pot for further boiling. Finally, the brew is transferred to another jar, where either airborne yeasts or the yeasts from earlier batches cause the liquid to ferment in about 3–4 days. *Chicha* does not store well and tends to sour in less than seven days (For the intrepid reader, an easy recipe for making *chicha* is found in the Aaronson and Ridgely article cited below).

Although there are no written records in the Andes before the Spanish Conquest (1532 AD), pots, strainers, and botanical remains found in archaeological contexts suggest that contemporary methods of preparing *chicha* were likely similar to methods used in the Andes since at least the Early Intermediate Period (200 BC – AD 750). We



**Figure 3: An early 17<sup>th</sup> century drawing of a woman serving *chicha* to the Inca king during the festival of the sun.**

know the most about the use of *chicha* during the Inca Empire (1430-1532 AD), when *chicha* was consumed in immense quantities at Inca feasts (**Figure 3**). Beer was made by the *acillacunas*, cloistered women that served the Inca by weaving cloth and brewing *chicha*. The Inca king offered *chicha* to his subjects in order to thank them for their labour service throughout the year. The quantity of *chicha* that was provided was seen as a reflection of power, and it is estimated that the Incas produced millions of litres of *chicha* each year at administrative centres across the Andes.

Earlier cultures likely consumed similar quantities of the brew at public events. For example, Michael Moseley and his colleagues recently announced the discovery of a brewery at the Middle Horizon site of Cerro Baúl (600-1000 AD). He found a corridor containing the remains

of 10 massive brewing vessels that were suspended over hearths. The corridor was connected to an open plaza that was strewn with broken bowls and cups from a ceremony that directly preceded the abandonment of the site. Interestingly, the beer for this final occasion was likely not made from corn, but from the fruits and seeds of *Schinus molle*, the California pepper tree. In a second example, Jerry Moore's work on the Chimú culture (900-1470 AD) of the North Coast of Peru, revealed that some households specialized in producing corn beer for the community. Based on the amount of *chicha* dregs found in one home, he estimated that 513 litres of beer were produced in a single episode.

After the Spanish conquest, some colonial administrators attempted to forbid the distribution of *chicha* by local leaders. The administrators quickly abandoned these attempts when they discovered the centrality of beer to Andean life. Beer was not only used to reciprocate for labour obligations, but it was also offered to gods and ancestors, defined gender roles, and marked ethnicity (**Figure 4**). Moreover, beer was drunk simply as a beverage – adults were consuming 2-3 litres of *chicha* at the beginning of the twentieth century. *Chicha* remains a popular beverage in the Andes today, and is still considered a proper offering to guests. It is common in many parts of the highlands, for example, for travelers to be offered a glass (and then another and another) by residents when they enter a more remote village.

Despite its longstanding importance, people have an ambivalent attitude to alcohol in the Andes today. Corn beer is rapidly being replaced in many places by *trago*, a poorly refined cane alcohol that can be bought for as little as 30 cents a litre. The availability of cheap, potent alcohol purchased at the local market (instead of brewed at home) has led to a rapid rise in alcoholism that is destroying families. I touched a nerve with of the old man in Nasca, I think, when I enquired about local drinking habits. For centuries, drinking brought

communities together; now it is increasingly driving them apart.

### **Ethnographic Wanderings**



**Figure 4: A 19<sup>th</sup> century lithograph of women pouring *chicha* out during the dawn of the dead celebration in Cuzco, Peru.**

By understanding how *chicha* is brewed and consumed today, we can begin to comprehend some of the possible roles that the beverage played in the past. I therefore continue to talk to villagers as often as I can about *chicha*. Along the way, I have developed a great respect for the ability of ethnologist's to ask delicate questions. Most of the time my ethnographic hopes continue to be frustrated – I vividly recall one interview where a villager's first response to me was that he drank only a glass of *chicha* a week, and then, three drinks into our discussion, he challenged me to a drinking contest – but I am at times rewarded by conversations that deepen my understanding of this long-standing tradition. My most fruitful conversations have been with women. As brewers, women take great pride in their *chicha* and they have taught me much about the varieties of corn used, the methods of straining the dregs out, and the proper ways to serve *chicha* to guests. My embarrassing pratfalls are a small price to pay for this knowledge.

### **Further Reading**

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